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Innocence & experience

The life and music of James Wilson
Mark Fitzgerald
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Over the last two decades or so the assessment of art music in Ireland has received growing attention from musicologists. A notable rise in publications has been paralleled by an increasing number of symposia and conferences focusing on the subject. The last four years alone have seen the publication of *The encyclopaedia of music in Ireland*, *Different voices: Irish music and music in Ireland*, *Music and identity in Ireland and beyond*, and *Irish musical studies 11: Irish musical analysis*.[1] These publications provide broad musicological contexts for previous focused investigations into the lives and music of individual composers such as Michele Esposito, Aloys Fleischmann, Seóirse Bodley and Raymond Deane, which were undertaken over the past decade by the ill-fated and now defunct Field Day music series. Two additional books focused on individual composers have also been released by other publishers: the present author's *Constellations: the life and music of John Buckley* probes much of John Buckley's prodigious output, and *The life and music of Brian Boydell*, a collection of essays that is an important if incomplete assessment of that composer's work. Bodley has been further addressed in Lorraine Byrne-Bodley's Carysfort Press publications, while an appreciation of the life and work of Frank Corcoran (*Festschrift at seventy*) was published in Germany in 2015.[2]

While this list of publications is by no means exhaustive, it is clear that the past two decades have seen a genuine and growing interest in the role of art music in Irish society. However, it would be wrong to assume that all is well. Although *The encyclopaedia of music in Ireland* stands as a formidable cornerstone of Irish musicology, a comprehensive history of music in Ireland has yet to be undertaken. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of sustained critical reflection on composers after

1. Harry White & Barra Boydell, edd.: *The encyclopaedia of music in Ireland* (Dublin, 2014); Benjamin Dwyer: *Different voices: Irish music and music in Ireland* (Hofheim, 2014); Mark Fitzgerald & John O'Flynn, edd.: *Music and identity in Ireland and beyond* (Farnham, 2014); Gareth Cox & Julian Horton, edd.: *Irish musical studies 11: Irish musical analysis* (Dublin, 2014).

2. Jeremy Dibble: *Michele Esposito* (Dublin, 2010); Séamas de Barra: *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin, 2006); Gareth Cox: *Seóirse Bodley* (Dublin, 2010); Patrick Zuk: *Raymond Deane* (Dublin, 2006); Benjamin Dwyer: *Constellations: the life and music of John Buckley* (Dublin, 2011); Gareth Cox, Axel Klein & Michael Taylor, edd: *The life and music of Brian Boydell* (Sallins, 2004); Lorraine Byrne Bodley: *A community of the imagination: Seóirse Bodley's Goethe settings* (Dublin, 2013); Lorraine Byrne Bodley: *A hazardous melody of being: Seóirse Bodley's song cycles on the poems of Micheal O'Siadhail* (Dublin, 2008); Lorraine Byrne Bodley: *Seóirse Bodley: three congregational masses* (Dublin, 2005); Hans-Dieter Grünefeld, ed. *Frank Corcoran Festschrift at seventy: old and new – Sean agus Núa: an Irish composer invents himself* (Hamburg, 2015).

Ó Riada: we are still awaiting dedicated studies into the music of Frederick May, John Kinsella, Gerald Barry, Jane O'Leary, Frank Corcoran (the *Festschrift* is a celebration rather than a thorough engagement), Jerome de Bromhead, Kevin Volans and Roger Doyle, among others. Little has been written either of well-established figures such as Kevin O'Connell, Gráinne Mulvey, Rhona Clarke, Piers Hellawell, Stephen Gardner, Barry Guy and Fergus Johnston. Additionally, it is now increasingly recognised that problems and dilemmas, be they sociocultural, political, scientific or artistic, can no longer be solved solely through isolated disciplines. Irish musicological studies, therefore, would benefit from being conducted within the broader themes of identity, political and cultural policy, diaspora and immigration, cultural studies and feminism, colonialism and post-colonialism, and the growing dominance and influence of neoliberalism in the arts. Assessments of Irish music using the internationalised rubrics of modernism, postmodernism and neo-modernism would provide a taxonomy that would act as a constructive and rigorous framework. Until quite recently, much Irish musicology has tended to conduct its work within fairly restricted thematic paradigms.

It is in this context that Mark Fitzgerald's *The life and music of James Wilson* makes its welcome appearance. Born in 1922, Wilson was until his death in 2005 one of the last of the elder statesmen of Irish art music. He was a prolific composer and through his teaching exercised a considerable influence on a wide range of younger figures in Irish music. As Wilson lived through most of the 20th century and into the 21st, a survey of his life and works also serves as a review of the Irish musical arena during this lengthy period, and to some extent this is what Fitzgerald gives us.

What becomes immediately apparent in this book is the ease with which Fitzgerald navigates both the life and works of Wilson. The reader is capably steered between biographical narratives and perceptive examinations of key works in a fluidly interweaving trajectory supported by insightful contextual backdrops. This easeful style, however, is not to be confused with lack of rigour. As well as drawing upon previously published interviews, the text is richly supported by heretofore-unknown research garnered from Wilson's private papers and manuscripts (now housed at the Trinity College Manuscript Library) and new interviews with close associates of Wilson such as the singer and RTÉ producer Anne Makower, composers John Buckley and Derek Ball, and the critic and commentator Ian Fox, among others.

Even for those of us who thought we knew Jim Wilson, Fitzgerald has sketched a biography that is not only fascinating in itself but clearly significant in considering the composer's later aesthetic and political

stances. He gives a clear picture of Wilson's early domestic life with his mother (his father died when the composer was four). We catch an intriguing glimpse of an inter-war London that is almost Dickensian, as we read of Miss Clara Tappe's school, which Wilson attended until old enough to go to secondary school. Here, the young Wilson sang songs to the accompaniment of Miss Tappe's violin and took part in plays such as *Puss in boots* and *As you like it*, which clearly offered early, formative experiences of the stage. Highbury County School was also influential: Wilson took piano lessons, developed a penchant for all things French and was active in the dramatic society, which presented both established and contemporary plays.

However, the most fascinating aspect of Wilson's early life was the War. Fitzgerald highlights the dangerous missions Wilson undertook as a radio mechanic with the Royal Navy Arctic Convoys. One account relates how his ship, *HMS Impulsive*, under attack from German U-boats, attempted to rescue survivors of an attacked destroyer. One hundred and eighty drowned in the freezing sea – just a handful were saved. It is horrifying experiences such as these that had a deep impact on Wilson's professed and cherished anti-war views; and this explains why many of his works are marked by pacifism, including the operas *A passionate man* and *Virata*, which were written as late as the 1990s. Wilson's life-long pacifism was demonstrated as recently as 2001, when he was one of a number of Aosdána members to sign a letter opposing the Afghanistan War.[3]

It is clear from Fitzgerald's biographical narratives that Wilson's musical education was both unorthodox and inconsistent. His interest in music as a possible career was, in fact, initiated on the ship while at war. Miniature scores could be brought aboard, and while at port he performed impromptu concerts with fellow crewmember musicians, and thus opportunities to hear and play music presented themselves. Significantly, the College at Sea initiative had been established in 1938, which offered Wilson the opportunity to take composition lessons. Surprisingly, he composed much music at this time despite the testing conditions of war at sea. After the war he went to Trinity College of Music, London, studying composition with Alec Rowley (1892–1958), whose Francophile leanings and conservative outlook – Rowley expressed regret that modern music lacked 'romantic beauty' – seem to have had a residual influence.

3. Aosdána is the Irish government's affiliation of creative artists, which was established in 1981 to honour those considered to have made a significant contribution to the arts in Ireland. See *http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie*.

One of the more curious aspects of Wilson's early biography is his decision to come to Ireland at the beginning of the 1950s. At a time when artistic expression came under what Robert Graves described as 'the fiercest censorship this side of the iron curtain', and when the country was experiencing yet another spate of mass emigration, Wilson's

resolve to move to Ireland with his lifelong partner John Campbell seems rather strange.[4] Wilson himself offers some unusual justifications, and Fitzgerald adds a few more of his own; however, the decision remains an odd one. It is true that homosexuality underwent increased scrutiny by the British authorities from the late 1940s; there is even some evidence to suggest that Benjamin Britten was officially investigated by Scotland Yard in the early 1950s; it is claimed that Scotland Yard interviewed him during the anti-homosexual move by the then Home Secretary, David Maxwell-Fyffe.[5]

But homosexuality was by no means accepted in the repressive church-dominated Ireland of the 1950s. And Wilson's stated justification for leaving London, that 'there were too many concerts, there were too many exhibitions, too many new operas and plays', which tended to over-stimulate him, remains unconvincing. Fitzgerald proffers another reason, suggesting that Britten's meteoric rise in the early 1950s as *the* establishment composer – officially demonstrated by the prestigious commission to compose the opera *Gloriana* (1953) on the occasion of the accession to the throne of Queen Elizabeth II – might have been a factor. Perhaps Wilson, for whom opera would become central to his artistic output, felt that Britten was likely to absorb all the potential performance opportunities for new works written in that genre. Whatever the reason, Wilson's subsequent hardships in Ireland relating to the acceptance and performance of his music must have made him question that fateful decision from time to time.

Indeed, Wilson's indefatigable efforts to have his music heard and accepted in Ireland become a central theme in the biographical sections of the book. In this regard, the 1950s were particularly arduous. Such difficulties were the result of a combination of his own miscalculations regarding instrumental forces and what might reasonably have been considered possible in Ireland's cultural environment, widespread perceptions within the Irish music scene at the time regarding Wilson's compositional abilities, and the rather underdeveloped infrastructure and poor commitment to new music by the Irish government and its cultural agencies.

While it is clear that the infrastructure in place for musical production, old or new, was lagging behind other European countries and that government policy towards music was at best uneven, it seems that Wilson failed to apprehend the implications of these deficiencies. Throughout the 1950s, for example, he cultivated a rather impractical approach to composition, creating works for the stage that were most unlikely to be performed such as the three-act ballet *Esther* (1952), and the two-act ballet *Le roi de l'ille* (1955), the latter for large orchestra including triple

4. Michael Adams: *Censorship: the Irish experience* (Dublin, 1968), p.250.

5. 'In a letter to Lord Beaverbrook, the Evening Standard's editor wrote that Scotland Yard was stepping up its action against homosexuals, that Benjamin Britten had been interviewed, and that Cecil Beaton was on the list': Kathleen Tynan: *The life of Kenneth Tynan* (London: Methuen, 1988), p.110.

wind, alto saxophone, piano and mandolin. Another ballet, *Cynara* (1957), written for the English stage, was also never performed. Additionally, works composed especially for school children such as *The hunting of the snark* (1963) and *The king of the golden river* (1987), which had considerable potential for widespread performance, required adults to execute them adequately. It appears therefore that Wilson's incapacity to develop a pragmatic approach to composition often made genuine progress in his career unnecessarily difficult.

Was there an element of innocent self-delusion in this? There is some indication that he was at times susceptible to frivolous theatrics. Mary Boydell's memory of a Wilson premiere at the Royal Irish Academy of Music seems to indicate elements of whimsical role-play: 'I remember Jim and the Commander [Campbell] so well at the opening night. At that time there was a little box in the Dagg Hall up on the left and the two of them appeared in evening dress which no one else was wearing. They looked so wonderful with carnations in their button holes and they were going through this lovely fantasy.'

This harmless sort of role-playing, however, may also have encouraged more serious and disconcerting attitudes towards Wilson during this period. Mary Boydell also points out that '[Wilson] was seen as an amateur because he was obviously being financially backed by John Campbell and there was that sort of aura, of somebody who did not need to work. It would mitigate against you. And then of course he was not of Irish origin.' Other commentators suggest that Campbell's ascendancy background and the couple's homosexuality may also have played a part in these rather negative opinions. It would seem that certain judgments supported an exclusionary stance towards Wilson, which indicates a less than attractive element pervading the Irish musical scene at the time. Whether these perceptions of Wilson as some kind of dilettante reinforced the refusal by Tibor Paul (principal conductor of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra) to perform his First Symphony is hard to say. But it is clear that, at least in the 1950s, Wilson had to work against certain embedded attitudes that, at their most benign, did not always take him seriously.

It is these contextual elements that give Fitzgerald's book an importance beyond the immediate project of investigating Wilson's music. Another such backdrop is highlighted in a section discussing Wilson's connection with Aosdána, of which he was a founder member. Members of Aosdána, meeting certain criteria, may avail of a stipend, or *cnuas*, to enable them to concentrate fully on their creative work. Fitzgerald highlights that the announcement of the inauguration of

Aosdána prompted 'a savage attack' in *The Times* from Bernard Levin. Whatever reasonable arguments Levin may have wished to make were completely undermined by his resorting to a most appalling degree of racism and anti-Irish stereotyping. This rant is notable in that it exposes a blatant example of postcolonial prejudice not just by Levin but also by *The Times*, which obviously felt assured that such transparent xenophobia was completely acceptable, even justifiable. For his part, Wilson's defence of Aosdána in *Soundpost* exposed his rather pitiable inability to address either Levin's bigoted attitudes or the establishment hegemony that protected such abrasive racism. For once, one wishes that he had left his pacifist principles behind and gone for a mightier pen.

A similar hint of excessive deference appears in a section dealing with Wilson's professional relationship with Charles Acton, the music critic for *The Irish Times* for 30 years from the mid-1950s. While privately writing that Acton was 'a fat slob of intellectual pretension', Wilson publicly honoured him with a dedication of his choral work *Xanadu* (1970). These two episodes give us some indication of the rather submissive way Wilson dealt with establishment figures; but it also indicates that perhaps such individuals enjoyed excessive power within cultural circles and institutions. Fitzgerald is right to point out, for example, that '[t]he centrality of RTÉ to music making did [...] mean that a small group of people had inordinate say over what large-scale music was performed in Ireland'; and this model was of course replicated in other areas within the musical arena both in Ireland and the UK, including within the press.

As I HAVE MENTIONED, Fitzgerald's book balances Wilson's biographical history with a series of more focused analyses of some of his major works from a body comprising an astonishing 200. He attends with solicitude and discretion to both the composer's achievements and failures in equal measure, and his appraisal is well balanced, covering most genres including opera (*The hunting of the snark*, *Twelfth night*, *Letters to Theo*, *The king of the golden river*, *Grinning at the devil* and *A passionate man*), orchestral works (Symphony no.2, *Le bateau ivre*, Concerto for harpsichord and chamber orchestra, *Angel one*, Viola Concerto and Concertino), vocal works (*Burns night*, *A woman young and old*, *Carrion comfort*, *The táin*, *The windhover*), and instrumental pieces (Quintet for accordion and strings, Violin Sonata, *Capricci* and *Thermagistris*), among others. Fitzgerald's approach combines a mixture of descriptive analyses supported by musical examples and insightful contextual background often supported by primary source material.

A typical example of his method can be seen in his focus on the orchestral work *Le bateau ivre* (1971). Wilson is one of those composers

who actually say very little about their work, and when he does, it is difficult to glean anything of significance from which one might learn something. Comments such as the following are fairly typical: 'why did I write *Le Bateau Ivre*? This music is the nearest I am ever likely to come to an autobiography. But, as with Tchaikovsky's autobiographical Sixth Symphony, the work must stand or fall on its musical merits.' Additional remarks don't bring us any closer to an understanding of the music: 'My work is not an attempt to translate Rimbaud's *Le Bateau Ivre* into music. The poem was one among several things that motivated the composition.' Faced with such general observations, Fitzgerald has to fill in the detail, which he does skilfully. Drawing upon interviews, he makes the connection that in *Le bateau ivre* Wilson was possibly conjuring up memories of the Royal Navy Arctic Convoys, with musical evocations of the polar seas and the Northern Lights. Fitzgerald hypothesises that breaking free is a core theme in the poem, and then links this to 'the social freedom that the war paradoxically gave to people'. Just as in many of Britten's works, *Le bateau ivre* thus serves as, what Proust called, 'the perfect lie' – a covert expression of Wilson's sexuality; hence his reference to it being autobiographical while simultaneously being vague about its meanings.[6] More detailed observations regarding the music itself are supported by descriptive analyses and references to score excerpts, which in the case of *Le bateau ivre* predominantly explore Wilson's use of heterophony.

While Fitzgerald's overall approach to analysing Wilson's music is both insightful and convincing, a further level of investigation would have been welcome. A more forensic and empirical assessment of at least some of his works would more accurately demonstrate what Wilson's achievements and deficiencies were, and how he constructed his music. This is perhaps my only reservation regarding the book. That said, Fitzgerald's method is mitigated somewhat by Wilson's autodidacticism, which can make his compositional processes hard to uncover. After all, we don't glean from his letters and statements any searching references to musical aesthetics, to composers who influenced him technically, or to specific stylistic developments in Ireland or elsewhere. For example, in a letter discussing his setting of TS Eliot's *The waste land*, there is little indication that he was aware of the aesthetic and technical leaps this landmark modernist work made in terms of literature more broadly; and there is no evidence of his music attempting to emulate the structural and aesthetic innovations inherent in that work – no evidence, in other words, of what Beckett describes as the artistic emphasis upon the act rather than the object of perception. In short, we don't get the picture of a composer either obsessed with technical procedure or fully cognizant of

6. Marcel Proust: *Remembrance of things past*, trans. CK Scott Moncrieff (London, 2006), pp.622–23.

the implications of major developments within the modernist project and beyond.

Similarly, Wilson makes it rather difficult for us to see the broader musical, political and aesthetic contexts within which he composes. A positive reference to György Ligeti in a late interview comes as something of a surprise. Comments that reveal the influence of other works and composers, such as those about Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight songs for a mad king*, which he heard performed at the 1974 Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music, are interesting when they appear, though we never find out how or why exactly such works impacted Wilson's compositional signature. Even where we do witness a direct influence – the semi-aleatoric techniques that are employed in Wilson's *Angel one* are probably derived from Lutosławski – we don't get a sense that Wilson has formed a stylistic and aesthetic connection with the Polish composer or with aleatoricism itself in a way that will definitively serve his own compositional aesthetics. This may explain why Fitzgerald opts for more descriptive elucidations of Wilson's signature, supported by contextual scene setting.

If we are sometimes left trying to piece together Wilson's idiom from the various analyses offered in the inner chapters, the Conclusion serves to bring together all the foregoing threads and to provide a more holistic picture of his style and contribution. In this regard, it proves to be one of the most important chapters in the book. Fitzgerald's intervention here is essential in underscoring the professional and social environment within which Wilson was working throughout his career and how it affected the production and reception of his music. He further aims to redress a number of received viewpoints regarding Wilson that seem to have gained a foothold in Irish musicology.

Wilson's eclectic use of tonality, polytonality, atonality, serial techniques and rhythmic variety are placed in the context of his slow development as a composer. Even by the 1970s, when he was in his 50s, the emergence of the Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music had a further impact on him, as he and others were broadly adopting trends that were new to Ireland. Fitzgerald points out that the late development of a modernism native to both Ireland and Britain also played a role in Wilson's development in that he was connected neither with the leading figures of high modernism (who were in fact of his generation – Xenakis, Boulez, Nono, Ligeti and Stockhausen) nor with contemporaneous English composers. Rather, Fitzgerald suggests that we should view Wilson as an aesthetic product of both the Nordic symphonic tradition (specifically Sibelius) and European 'texture'-orientated composers (such as Debussy, Ravel, Lutosławski and Dutilleux), with perhaps the spiky neo-classicism of Stravinsky and Prokofiev providing an influential focal

point. Thus, while Wilson rejected the avant-garde, he also refused the melodic simplicity of Britten and Arnold; later developments such as minimalism, which he described as little more than 'painting by numbers', made no impact whatsoever.

In the Conclusion, Fitzgerald also provides an astute assessment of the Irish musical environment in the 20th century. One prominent phenomenon is what he calls the 'transitory nature of composition' that the country nurtured, that is, that Ireland developed an attitude to new music whereby 'few compositions, particularly large-scale ones, receive a second performance, and performing groups fulfill their obligation to new music with a stream of "world premieres" which for most works will be both first and last performances'. As Fitzgerald rightly points out, 'a major work such as the Second Symphony has yet to receive an adequate performance, let alone a recording'.

This book is by no means a hagiography and, as demonstrated in the inner chapters, the author is robust in all his evaluations of Wilson's work. He does, however, succeed in striking a fair balance. For example, we are informed that Wilson demonstrates weaknesses of technique, chiefly in his early output, but that he went on to develop a formidable compositional craft by the end of his life. He further points out that the composer's curious unwillingness to edit or revise works may not help in any prospective rehabilitation or retrospective. While prepared to identify Wilson's deficiencies, Fitzgerald is also keen to come to his defence and counter what he considers unfair assessments that appear to have gained traction over the years. To the view that Wilson 'was of course an amateur', the author responds that he was 'by no means alone in his limited formal training as a composer in Ireland'. He is also quick to identify problems in Irish musicological historiography: the assumption that while Wilson demonstrates unevenness in his compositional output but that Brian Boydell is 'identified unquestioningly as one of Ireland's most important composers' is rejected by Fitzgerald as 'a curious sort of double standard'. While admitting that Wilson's work was perhaps undermined by an 'unorthodox approach to formal structures, particularly evident in larger scale works', the author points out that Boydell's approach to formal structures was no less unorthodox, observing that 'the intended teleological impetus of [Boydell's first string quartet] is impeded by his technical limitations'. That sort of even-handedness and a willingness to question established and, to date, unquestioned musicological narratives are the hallmarks of Fitzgerald's work.

Cork University Press has produced an attractive and important book, and the Appendices provide valuable catalogues of Wilson's complete

oeuvre. *The life and music of James Wilson* provides an overdue assessment of a composer who played a significant role in the development of Irish art music in the 20th century, and Fitzgerald has more than achieved his stated aspiration of helping 'to steer interested performers on their own journey through the Wilson archive' and to '[heighten] awareness of even one corner of Ireland's musical past'. Hopefully, the book will reignite interest in a composer who, since his death, has been sorely neglected.